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LAOS

The morale of the non-communist leadership is continuing to decline in the wake of communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

According to the US embassy in Vientiane, the degree of demoralization is so serious that there appears to be no question of military resistance by the non-communists if the Pathet Lao once again resort to major countrywide hostilities--particularly if they are backed by the North Vietnamese.

There is still no evidence that either the Lao communists or their patrons in Hanoi are planning to scuttle the 13-month-old coalition in favor of a military solution. Indeed, Pathet Lao Deputy Prime Minister Phoumi Vongvichit recently assured the Lao ambassadors who were in Vientiane for consultation that, while military incidents such as the recent fighting at Sala Phou Khoun are inevitable, war will not be resumed in Laos.

Nevertheless, key rightist coalition politicians are running scared, and their will to resist politically as well as militarily appears to be evaporating rapidly. According to the British ambassador in Vientiane, last week's anti-rightist May Day demonstration there has caused some non-communist ministers to consider resigning. The principal targets of the Pathet Lao - inspired demonstration--Defense Minister Sisouk na Champassak, Finance Minister Ngon Sananikone, Health Minister Khamphay Abhay, and Deputy Foreign Minister Tianethone Chantharasy--reportedly are among those thinking of quitting.

Ngon Sananikone has confirmed the British ambassador's report. He told the US chargé that the non-communist side had "lost," and that the problem now was to avoid confrontation in favor of diplomacy. Ngon believes that the resignation of non-communist cabinet ministers who have repeatedly clashed with the Pathet Lao, and their replacement by less controversial figures, might help to ease tensions between the two sides and preserve the fragile coalition.

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This defeatist attitude has been aggravated in recent days by rumors that Pathet Lao headquarters in Sam Neua has issued a directive calling for the elimination of non-communist leaders by assassination or other means. Senior non-communists, believing the rumor, are said to fear for their lives. Phoui Sananikone--the former president of the recently dissolved National Assembly and a leading rightist power-broker--last Sunday asked the American embassy for political asylum in the US. Phoui felt that he was a prime target since, as prime minister in the 1958-59 coalition experiment, he had ordered the arrest of Pathet Lao leaders Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit.

Despite the apprehension and pessimism sweeping the ranks of the non-communists, the US chargé does not believe that mass resignation by their cabinet members is imminent. He believes the non-communists will await the return of senior Pathet Lao coalition officials from Sam Neua--where they are wining and dining King Savang--to determine whether Lao communist attitudes and policies have in fact hardened as the result of communist victories elsewhere in Indochina.

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CHINA

Five of China's highest ranking vice premiers apparently have assumed responsibility for some of the duties formerly handled by Premier Chou En-lai.

These five vice premiers were named, along with seven others at the Fourth National People's Congress in January, partly to relieve the burden borne by Chou and vice premiers Teng Hsiao-ping and Li Hsien-nien. All 12 appear to be functioning as a collective leadership body, with Teng the senior official. Teng, acknowledged to be Chou's eventual successor, usually greets the most important foreign visitors, but the other four high-ranking vice premiers also receive distinguished guests from abroad. Chen Hsi-lien recently hosted a delegation from North Yemen.

Only two foreign leaders--North Korea's Kim Il-song and Belgian Prime Minister Tindemans--have recently been received by both Chairman Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai. The age and health of Mao and Chou may continue to limit the number of foreign dignitaries to whom they will grant an audience.

While the assumption of some of Chou's duties by others will probably not lead to major changes in China's foreign policy, negotiations with the successors are quite likely to be more difficult and, in some instances, less productive.

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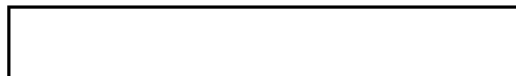
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